



No lessons learnt

The Meghalaya mining disaster exposes a series of administrative lapses

The disaster that struck a coal mine at Ksan in Meghalaya's Jaintia Hills district on December 13, trapping at least 13 workers, is a shocking reminder that a fast-growing economy such as India continues to allow Dickensian mining practices. India being home to some of the worst mine disasters, such as Chasnala near Dhanbad in 1975 in which more than 370 people were killed, the full spectrum of mining activity should be tightly regulated. Yet, the Ksan mine, referred to as a rat hole, was allowed to function in violation of not just safety norms but a complete prohibition issued by the National Green Tribunal. Clearly, the administration did not act to stop unscrupulous operators of the illegal mine from exploiting desperate workers, some of them from Assam, who were willing to work the rat hole tunnels because that is the most remunerative employment available to them. Unscientific mining led to a collapse of the chamber and deadly flooding followed. After disaster struck, it was incumbent on the Meghalaya government to launch an immediate rescue effort. But it did not possess the equipment to dewater the stricken mine quickly, and did not show any urgency in requisitioning it from elsewhere, in spite of the involvement of the National Disaster Response Force. The families of the workers are now left hoping for a miracle. Meghalaya has no excuse for not closing down such dangerous mines. What it can and should do now, jointly with the Assam government where needed, is to offer adequate compensation and jobs for the next of kin of the workers without delay.

Official inquiries into flooding disasters at approved mines, including Chasnala, have shown serious shortcomings in safety management. Two years ago, a landslide at an open cast mine in Goda, Jharkhand, killed 23 people, raising questions about the rigour of the technical assessment done prior to expansion of extraction activity. A study on three big flooding accidents published in 2016 by the IIT-Indian School of Mines, Dhanbad, concluded that the official approach of fixing responsibility on human error was flawed, since it did not try to identify the root cause. There is little evidence to show that pre-mining surveys and safety protocols are incorporating such advice. The case of illegal mines falls in a different category. Unapproved work, which appears to have led to the Meghalaya accident, cannot continue, and employment should be provided to those who are displaced. Illegal mining has been highlighted by activists, but they have become targets of violence by those operating the mines. In the glare of national attention, Chief Minister Conrad Sangma has acknowledged that illegal mining does take place. His government has been remiss as it failed to act on the NGT's directions. It must bear responsibility for what has happened at Ksan, and work to prevent such tragedies.

Winter bear hug

Stocks everywhere show signs of weakness as central banks tighten monetary policy

U.S. President Donald Trump probably did not have his best Christmas this year. American stocks suffered their worst Christmas-eve loss in market history with the Dow Jones Industrial Average losing a massive 650 points on Monday, a drop of almost 3% within a single trading session. Mr. Trump has been keen on projecting the stock market's performance as a gauge of how well the U.S. economy is doing under his presidency. While U.S. and global stocks performed extremely well in the first year of Mr. Trump's presidency, they haven't lived up to his expectations this year. The Dow Jones, now down almost 19% from its peak in early October, is clearly teetering near bear market territory. The index is down about 12% since the beginning of the year. The S&P 500 is already more than 20% down from its intra-day peak during the year, thus meeting the common definition of a bear market. And the Japanese Nikkei index dropped 5% on Christmas day. The Christmas-eve slump in the U.S. came after Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin's statement on Sunday announcing the convening of the President's Working Group on Financial Markets, colloquially known as the Plunge Protection Team, that last met in 2008 in the midst of the global financial crisis. Investors interpreted the statement as a sign of possible trouble brewing within the financial system, thus contributing to at least some of the panic in the markets on Monday.

It is no surprise that stocks in the U.S. and around the world have shown signs of weakness just around the time the Federal Reserve and other major Western central banks have been keen on ending the era of easy money by tightening monetary policy. Many major indices have either broken their short-term uptrend or struggled to go past their most recent highs. Mr. Trump has expectedly been public about his criticism of Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell, who has surprised many by sticking to his plan of gradual rate hikes despite U.S. inflation being comfortably below the Fed's target rate of 2%. He fears that rising interest rates could derail economic growth that has been quite robust in recent times and affect his popularity. Historically, politicians have generally favoured easy money policies represented by low interest rates while central bankers have insisted on sticking to their primary mandate of controlling price inflation. So the battle between the President and the Federal Reserve Chairman is not completely surprising, except for Mr. Trump's criticism of the Fed. What is important to observe is how markets, which have now clearly begun to price in the effects of tighter monetary policy around the world, will fare in the era of more normalised interest rates.

Being a good neighbour

India must shed its zero-sum style foreign policy-making, and work towards South Asian integration



HAPPYMON JACOB

If South Asia is one of the world's least integrated regions, India is one of the world's least regionally-integrated major powers. While there indeed are structural impediments (posed by both India and its neighbours) in fostering regional integration, the most significant handicap is New Delhi's ideological disinclination towards its neighbourhood. Successive regimes have considered the neighbourhood as an irritant and challenge, not an opportunity. Seldom have India's policies displayed a sense of belonging to the region or a desire to work with the neighbourhood for greater integration and cooperation. Today, we have become even more transactional, impatient and small-minded towards our neighbourhood which has, as a result, restricted our space for manoeuvre in the regional geopolitical scheme of things.

At a critical juncture

Whichever way one looks at it, India's neighbourhood policy is at a critical juncture: while its past policies have ensured a steady decline in its influence and goodwill in the region, the persistent absence of a coherent and well-planned regional policy will most definitely ensure that it eventually slips out of India's sphere of influence. India's foreign policy planners therefore need to reimagine the country's neighbourhood policy before it is too late.

The Narendra Modi government's neighbourhood policy be-

gan exceptionally well with Mr. Modi reaching out to the regional capitals and making grand foreign policy commitments. But almost immediately, it seemed to lose a sense of diplomatic balance, for instance, when it tried to interfere with the Constitution-making process in Nepal and was accused of trying to influence electoral outcomes in Sri Lanka. While India's refugee policy went against its own traditional practices, it was found severely wanting on the Rohingya question, and seemed clueless on how to deal with the political crisis in the Maldives. Despite their characteristic bravado and grandstanding, the BJP government's foreign policy mandarins looked out of their depth.

While it is true that 2018 seems to have brought some good news from the regional capitals, it has less to do with our diplomatic finesse than the natural course of events there. The arrival of an India-friendly Ibrahim Mohamed Solih regime in Male has brought much cheer, and the return of Ranil Wickremesinghe as Sri Lankan Prime Minister is to India's advantage too. Nepal has reached out to India to put an end to the acrimony that persisted through 2015 to 2017. Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh are also positively disposed towards India, though the relationship with Pakistan continues to be testy and directionless. What this then means is that New Delhi has a real opportunity today to recalibrate its neighbourhood relations.

Lessons from the past

First, let's briefly examine what should not be done in dealing with a sensitive neighbourhood. For one, India must shed its aggression and deal with tricky situations with far more diplomatic



subtlety and finesse. The manner in which it weighed down on Nepal in 2015 during the Constitution-making process is an example of how not to influence outcomes. The ability of diplomacy lies in subtly persuading the smaller neighbour to accept an argument rather than forcing it to, which is bound to backfire.

Second, it must be kept in mind that meddling in the domestic politics of neighbour countries is a recipe for disaster, even when invited to do so by one political faction or another. Preferring one faction or regime over another is unwise in the longer term. Take the example of incumbent Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena. There was a great deal of cheer in New Delhi when he took office in January 2015 (with some saying India helped him cobble together a winnable coalition) after defeating Mahinda Rajapaksa, considered less well disposed toward India. However, Mr. Sirisena's political transformation was quick, as were India's fortunes in Colombo, at least temporarily.

Third, New Delhi must not fail to follow up on its promises to its neighbours. It has a terrible track record in this regard.

Fourth, there is no point in competing with China where China is at an advantage *vis-à-vis* India. This is especially true of re-

gional infrastructure projects. India simply does not have the political, material or financial wherewithal to outdo China in building infrastructure. Hence India must invest where China falls short, especially at the level of institution-building and the use of soft power. However, even in those areas China seems to be forging ahead. India must therefore invest a great deal more in soft power promotion (and not the Hindutva kind of outreach). To begin with, India could expand the scope and work of the South Asian University (SAU), including by providing a proper campus (instead of allowing it to function out of a hotel building) and ensuring that its students get research visas to India without much hassle. If properly utilised, the SAU can become a point for regional integration.

Looking for convergence

Finally, while reimagining its neighbourhood policy, New Delhi must also look for convergence of interests with China in the Southern Asian region spanning from Afghanistan to Nepal to Sri Lanka. There are several possible areas of convergence, including counter terrorism, regional trade and infrastructure development. China and India's engagement of the South Asian region needn't be based on zero-sum calculations. For example, any non-military infrastructure constructed by China in the region can also be beneficial to India while it trades with those countries. A road or a rail line built by China in Bangladesh or Nepal can be used by India in trading with those countries.

Going forward, New Delhi must invest in three major policy areas. There needs to be better regional trading arrangements. The reason why South Asia is the least inte-

grated region in the world is because the economic linkages are shockingly weak among the countries of the region. The lead to correct this must be taken by India even if this means offering better terms of trade for the smaller neighbours. While it is true that long 'sensitive lists' maintained by South Asian countries are a major impediment in the implementation of SAFTA, or the South Asian Free Trade Area, India could do a lot more to persuade them to reduce the items on such lists. Second, several of India's border States have the capacity to engage in trading arrangements with neighbouring countries. This should be made easier by the government by way of constructing border infrastructure and easing restrictions on such border trade.

Resurrect SAARC

Second, India prefers bilateral engagements in the region rather than deal with neighbours on multilateral forums. However, there is only so much that can be gained from bilateral arrangements, and there should be more attempts at forging multilateral arrangements, including by resurrecting the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Third, India must have a coherent and long-term vision for the neighbourhood devoid of empty rhetoric and spectacular visits without follow up. We must ask ourselves, as the biggest country in the South Asian neighbourhood, what kind of a region do we want to be situated in, and work towards enabling that.

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Abandoned on the battlefield

The U.S. has a moral obligation to keep the Syrian Kurds safe, instead of giving Turkey a free run



STANLY JOHNY

U.S. President Donald Trump's recent decision to pull American troops out of Syria is a body blow to the Syrian Kurds, the unsung heroes of the war against the Islamic State (IS). The U.S. began bombing the IS in September 2014 after the jihadist group announced a new Caliphate with territories spread across the Iraqi-Syrian border. But the bombing campaign remained largely ineffective till the U.S. found a partner on the ground to take on IS positions.

The decline of the IS actually began in Kobane, a largely Kurdish-populated Syrian town on the Turkish border, in January 2015. At that time, the group was fast-expanding from eastern Syria, where it established its de facto capital in Raqqah, to the border towns in the northeast. The Turkish-Syrian border remained porous, allowing the IS to transport militants in and out of Syria freely. It was the height of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-declared Caliph's bloodbath campaign. It laid siege to the city of Kobane. After a six-month-long

battle, the People's Protection Units (YPG), the militia of the Syrian Kurdistan, recaptured the battered city and ousted the IS. The U.S. provided air cover. It was after the battle for Kobane that then U.S. President Barack Obama realised the real strategic potential of the Kurdish rebels.

The Kobane experience was repeated in nearby towns. The YPG freed Tal Abyad in July and moved to oust the IS from the Syria-Turkish border region. After these initial victories, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of Kurdish, Arab and Assyrian militias and led by the YPG, was formed in 2015 with the blessings of the U.S. It has since become the official defence force of the Syrian Kurdistan (commonly known as Rojava). The U.S. doesn't have a major troops presence in the region. Since Mr. Obama sent some 50 commandos to advise the Kurds in 2015, the number of American troops has grown to at least 2,000. But in the territories east of the Euphrates that are part of the Rojava, the U.S. has built massive military infrastructure – it has at least a dozen military bases, including four airfields.

Success story

This American-Kurdish partnership has been a success story. Within three years of its formation, the SDF has defeated the IS in



most of the territories the group held. After capturing the (Kurdish) border areas, the SDF moved to Arab-populated towns in the east such as Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor and freed them one after the other. The IS, which once claimed territories as big as the United Kingdom, has now been confined to some narrow pockets on the Iraqi-Syrian border. But the U.S.'s support for the Kurds and their military victories has irked another country in the region – Turkey, a NATO member and an American ally. The YPG (the main component of the SDF) has close ties with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the Kurdish militant group on the Turkish side which is seen as a terrorist organisation by both Ankara and Washington. Abdullah Öcalan, one of the founding leaders of the PKK who has been imprisoned in Turkey since 1999, is revered in Rojava as well. So Turkey fears the military mobilisation of the Rojava would embolden the

PKK. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (*left, in picture*) has also been upset that the U.S. has been backing the Kurdish rebels, who he often refers to as terrorists.

Turkey's attack on Afrin, a predominantly Kurdish town on the Syrian side, in January this year was born out of this security concern. Mr. Erdoğan wants to create a buffer between the Turkish border and the Rojava. The plan is to capture the border region from Kurdish militants and hand it over to pro-Turkey rebel groups – there are Turkmen and Arab rebels in Syria who get aid from Turkey. And if Turkey occupies parts of Syria on the border – Turkish-backed militants operate in Idlib, a rebel-held territory – it will also give Turkey a seat on the high table to find a solution to the Syria crisis. But a major impediment to execute this plan has been the continuing U.S. presence in Rojava. The Afrin attack was limited in scale. Since then, Mr. Erdoğan has on several occasions made empty threats to send troops to other areas, including Manbij, where U.S. troops are present. With the U.S. pulling out of Syria, it's a green light to Mr. Erdoğan to make his moves freely.

Support and betrayal

The U.S. has a history of supporting and betraying the Kurds. After the First World War, U.S. President

Woodrow Wilson backed the idea of autonomy for non-Turkish minorities of the Ottoman Empire. But the Allied Powers never pushed for it. When the post-Ottoman boundaries were redrawn, the Kurds were split among four countries – Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. In all these countries, they have been a persecuted minority. The example of the Iraqi Kurds is telling.

Unfortunately, the Syrian Kurds face the same fate. Syrian Kurdistan is not a constitutionally recognised autonomous entity like Iraqi Kurdistan. They are surrounded by enemies, the remnants of the IS, a vengeful, insecure Turkish military and the blood-soaked Syrian regime. In theory, the U.S. pulling out of an illegal war is fine – the American intervention has neither congressional approval nor the UN Security Council's nod. But in practice, since the U.S. intervention has already started shaping the reality on the ground, the pull-out should have been an orderly one. The U.S. has the moral obligation to ensure the safety of the Syrian Kurds. It could have used the pull-out as a bargaining chip to get concessions both from Ankara and Damascus. Instead, Mr. Trump's abrupt decision leaves the Kurds twisting in the whirlwind.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Importance of Bogibeel

That it took 16 years to build the India's longest bridge, the Bogibeel – 21 years if one considers the date the foundation stone was laid – requires introspection as far as the pace of India's project implementation is concerned (Page 1, "PM opens Bogibeel Bridge, India's longest", December 26).

But this government needs to be applauded for giving the Northeast region renewed priority as a part of the three C's – connectivity, commerce and communication. Along with these, projects such as HIRA (Highways, Inland Waterways, Railways and Airways), the National Bamboo Mission, the Digital North East Vision 2022 and a National Sports University (Manipur) will help people in the region. However, the journey must not stop here as there are many

challenges before the law and order situation. Tourism too needs to be given a push. The bridge must eventually be a part of a trilateral highway project connecting the Northeast, Myanmar and Thailand.

HARSAHIB SINGH,
Ludhiana, Punjab

■ The bridge is another feather in the cap of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government with respect to development programmes for the Northeast. This is a region with many resources that remain untapped because of insurgency-related threats. If the potential of these States is harnessed, the Northeast can boost India. Developmental programmes such as the bridge will not only boost connectivity but also help to reduce militancy in the region. Such projects are bound to boost morale in the region. The fact is that the security situation in the

Northeast has improved under the NDA regime.

ARCHANA VENKATAMADHVARAJ,
Millerpuram, Thoothukkudi

Change in the air?

Union Minister Nitin Gadkari, while speaking at the annual Intelligence Bureau endowment lecture in New Delhi recently, appears to have had a word of praise for Jawaharlal Nehru's brand of secularism and inclusiveness – a strict taboo topic for his party. Is there a change in the air for the BJP after its electoral losses in three key Hindi heartland States? By default or design, the BJP might have ceded Hindutva space to others. On top of this, 'Achche Din' too seems to be going the same way as the 'India Shining' campaign of 2004.

The BJP appears to have an inkling that a dispersed mandate in 2019 could entail the support of others beyond its traditional allies. Apart

from pitching a more conciliatory ideology, the party, in the form of Mr. Gadkari's remarks, could as well be hinting at a leadership switch in the NDA to be able to invite greater acceptability, within and outside.

R. NARAYANAN,
Navi Mumbai

Mine accident

The fate of the miners trapped in a 'rat-hole' in Meghalaya is not known. That we are so ill-prepared to deal with a crisis situation such as this is brought out by the inability of our disaster managers to even locate where the trapped miners are. The efforts made in India to rescue the trapped miners is in sharp contrast to the Thai cave rescue that gripped the world. Thailand pooled its resources and prayers and stood as one nation to achieve the seemingly unachievable. Illegal mining should not be

blamed on the labourers, but on those who make big money out of it.

G. DAVID MILTON,
Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

Money pile

The present situation of the banks under the Prompt Corrective Action framework having liquidity surplus on the one hand, and other financial institutions grappling with a shortage of cash on the other highlights the lack of attention to the probable outcomes of the PCA norms ('Business' page, "Banks under PCA sitting on cash pile", December 26). Although the government's plan to inject additional capital into PCA banks sounds optimistic, it requires

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

The report, "Nine bank unions call for one-day strike on December 26" (some editions, Dec. 24, 2018), had erred in referring to Vijaya Bank as being under the prompt corrective action (PCA) framework of the Reserve Bank of India. Vijaya Bank is not under the PCA.

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